

Bodies Crying out for Justice
The Rev. Dr. Lis Valle of McCormick Theological Seminary
Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota
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Text: Luke 2:22-40

Greetings today from McCormick Theological Seminary. My name is Lis Valle and I teach worship and preaching at McCormick. This is my third year doing that and I'm very grateful to be there. Two of the things that I like about McCormick we're launching since I've been there: One is the solidarity-building initiative. It's a program that was created to enhance the work we already were doing with people who are incarcerated. We have students who are in Cook County Jail and some of our colleagues have been teaching theology courses there. And since the pandemic started, we tried giving, well actually Dr. Danny McBride taught a course using correspondence, all school writing letters, correspondence. So I'm really grateful for her efforts. And the other initiative that was recently launched, as recently as June, 2020, is the Center for Reparative Justice, Transformation, and Remediation, which McCormick Theological Seminary and Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference together formed. And it's going to be housed here at McCormick. But I think the people in the best position to tell you what's going on at McCormick and what great things are happening there are students. So for that reason, I'm going to be sharing with you the testimony of one of our students.

"Hi! My name is Adriana Rivera, and I'm so grateful to be a part of the McCormick family. The biggest thing I'm grateful for are the courses that McCormick offers and how they've influenced me as a theologian, as a minister, and as an educator. I'm particularly thankful for Eighth Century Prophets, a class I took with Dr. Gina Cane, and how it's influenced the social justice work that I do in my community, whether that's around environmental justice, around immigration, or around school reform. I'm also thankful for classes like Hersotry, which uplift voices that are traditionally silenced, with Dr. Ken Sawyer, and all of these different courses that have made me who I am today. I'm also thankful for the wonderful connections I've been able to make through the Center for the Study of Latino Theology and Ministry. I started off getting connected to workshops through the center, which led to certificate courses, which then led to my MDiv path. So thanks to McCormick, I have these amazing courses as well as connection that will last a lifetime."

Lis Valle: It is my pleasure to be with you all today. I'm very thankful for this opportunity to share what I see in this text for us today, in Luke 2:22-40, as it was read. Today I want to talk to you about the bodies that cry out to you for justice. Why then do we try so hard to eliminate the body in everything we do? Jesus' family was in Jerusalem, in the story we read, to perform a ritual obligation - one that was caused not by Jesus' body but by the body of Mary. Well, you know what? It was also Jesus' fault. It was the time of her purification for having given birth to

Jesus. The lectionary and the narrator attempted to erase the changes in the bodies of Jesus and Mary. The Revised Common Lectionary skips the verse that tells the story of Jesus' circumcision. The narrator of Luke omits the reason for "them" to need purification. That the narrator of Luke tries to erase the bodies of Jesus and Mary has consequences. It allows us to focus on a "spirit-only" kind of salvation. But today - today, especially - I find myself with the people of Israel and Simeon and Anna, the day *before* Mary's purification. With them, I am waiting for salvation, consolation, redemption of our whole selves, because changes in the body are the foundation that make possible this story. I invite us to pay attention to the stages of body transformation.

How does our practice of being aware of our bodies shape our idea of the divine and therefore our interpretation of this text? Let's begin with the reason for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph to be in the temple in Jerusalem. As I said, it was Mary's childbirth. Exodus 13:3 and 12 call for Israelites to consecrate the first offspring of every woman. Now, there was no rite at the temple or before a priest associated with such consecration. But Leviticus 12 explains the ritual for purification of a woman after giving birth. The ritual included bringing a one-year-old lamb to the priest, or if you cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way, the priest will make atonement for her and she will be clean. And this was to be done 33 days after the baby's circumcision, if he was male, and the circumcision was to be done on the eighth day. So between the seven days and the 33 - the seven days before, and then starting to count 33 since the circumcision day - Jesus must have been 40 days old when this story of encountering Simeon and Anna at the temple happened.

The gospel of Luke places emphasis on Jesus' parents fulfilling the law, and on Jesus being the fulfillment of the law. In today's passage, this gospel conveys the special nature of Jesus as salvation and consolation for Israel. This emphasis needed not to result in the erasure of Jesus' and Mary's bodies...but it did. The one, we believe, makes possible salvation: Jesus' body. And the other made possible the incarnation. Without Mary there is no baby Jesus. Jesus had to come through the body of a woman. Should I also mention that he had to go through a birth canal to get here? And here we are with a 40 days old baby Jesus accompanying his mama to her purification, 33 days after his own circumcision and consecration. And here we are also witnessing two old bodies, one male and one female, who testified to Jesus being the savior. This story is based on changing bodies and tells of many bodies, forming a communal body. For long, many of them were looking forward to the redemption of Israel, as verse 38 tells us.

I gathered with a small group of Latinx women. We interpreted these texts from the perspective of our bodies, "*en conjuncto*." We did that together, and I'm going to show them to you just because I can, since we're using this technology, since we are using this way of communicating with one another. One, I want you to see who are all the people that are bringing these

ceremonies to you. [Photographs shown.] I want you to meet Alba, Patricia, Cristian. These are all Latinx women who have a theological education. We are part of the lucky ones to have that privilege, who helped to together look at this text from a *Latina, feminista, mujerista, evangelica* perspective, all of those things together. And this is what we found. This is what we all said: we proclaim that bodies are gifts from God to us. Bodies are divine. As our bodies change and we grow chronologically, we understand more God's humanity. We also gain wisdom, embodied wisdom. The body already has divine wisdom, has Imago Dei, has the sparkle of God within. Simeon and Anna confirmed what Joseph and Mary already knew about Jesus: to know the body is to know part of God's blessing. And, as the text tells us, the body of Jesus was growing and getting full of divine wisdom.

Bodies interrelate. The interaction between Jesus, Joseph, and Mary was essential in Jesus' growing up. Jesus must have seen his parents work for the well-being of their community. Jesus' body memorized the ways of being of his parents and of his community. Perhaps, he saw his mother Mary living into the Canticle from just one chapter ago in the gospel of Luke, but almost nine months ago in Mary's life. In that Canticle, God's mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. God has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their innermost thoughts. God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. God has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. Mary's Canticle - Elizabeth's Canticle - proclaims that God has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. Jesus' small body grew up and became stronger with such teachings. That body of Jesus grew and illuminated love and learning, and had open heart and open hands and open arms to learn from others, always inspired by the Spirit and grace of God. Jesus noticed that the body was essential in matters of daily life. For work, food, sex, desire, passion, justice. He lodged himself in the injustices. He put his body in the midst of violence, and used his body to defend women who suffered violence. Eventually his own body suffered violence as well. Jesus' body witnessed suffering and pain. Jesus' body joined other bodies to work for justice. These bodies suffered together and they were setting themselves free.

And perhaps growing up, Jesus felt within him that there was something wrong. Under the Roman empire, he was learning that the spirit is for God, but the body is evil. As he worked with people, he also worked within himself, understanding his humanity and divinity mixed together in a single being. Misbehaving, maybe; for sure, when he got close to women. When he was doing miracles on Saturdays instead of resting, he was figuring out what was the best course of action: what way to way, how to live. In everyday life, Jesus worked on combining what he learned from society, from his religious community, from his parents, from within himself. All of these bodies together, crocheted, interwoven, co-created their story. Jesus was working through his own fears and insecurities in community. As we consider that God incarnated in the body of a woman who gave birth to Jesus' body and had to go to the priest with two doves or two young

pigeons, because Mary had no means to bring a lamb, what was her experience? What was Mary's experience? In the passage we read today, as it was customary in her historical experience, Mary's body was not recognized, was invisible, even though she gave birth to divinity enfleshed. She gave birth to a hybrid body - a human-divine body - but her body, as a woman in her time, was considered property. Still today, women's bodies are considered property in some contexts, in some communities. And, sometimes, also the children of ministers. These kids are considered everyone's children and sometimes treated as everyone's property. But women like Mary, they have "*nepantleras*" a space that is not here or there, a liminal space. These women create liminal spaces with their own bodies. Their own bodies are bridges, especially in these times of change and struggle, and they give birth to kids like Aiden.

I learned of Aiden's story from the documentary, "A Place at the Table." And, as I did with the women who co-interpreted these texts with me, I'm gonna share with you who is Aiden, and who is Aiden's mom, and who is Aiden's sister.

[Video clip: Aiden is a child of about 4, his sister perhaps 6. Their mother speaks:] "Assistance programs in the United States are very hard to qualify for. It's like, either you're starving, or you don't get any help. So what defines starving? Like, if you don't eat for a day, are you starving? In their eyes, no; but in your eyes and in the way you feel, of course!"

Slide: Food stamp eligibility is based on total household income. To qualify, the income for a family of three cannot exceed \$24,000 per year. [Video clip of Aiden, mom, and sister cooking spaghetti noodles.]

Lis Valle: When I see Aiden, I see Jesus. I see Jesus in Aiden. I was taught to see that way. My home church, when I was growing up, when I was a kid, my church told me in a song:

"Al mirar la sonrisa de un niño al pasar en eso yo veo belleza."

"As I go by and I see the smile in a small child's face, right there, I see beauty - right there, I see my God."

So you see, in Aiden's body, there is also the spark of life, the *Imago Dei*, the spark of the divine. And in this documentary, "A Place at the Table," when it was produced, there were 50 million Americans, people living in the US, with US citizenship, experiencing food insecurity. Aiden, his mother and his sister, were three of those 50 million. Aiden's mother cried as she told their story later. Her body was producing salty water coming out of her [tear] ducts - *los conductos lagrimales* - working hard and not being able to feed her children. Working hard, full time, and not being able to feed her children. For a time she was unemployed, as so many of the poorest of this country are now, because of the global pandemic, which only made things worse for those who were already unemployed or with minimum wage employment. She took them to school, she looked for a job, but her body was lodged in a system that keeps them all in poverty. Aiden's

mother, her body joined other bodies in a campaign. They did advocacy, lobbying, they shared their pictures and their stories. Every time Aiden's mom shared their stories, she said, "I have dreams for my children, too. And I want also to be successful." She had her own dreams, too. So these mothers were fighting for their children to get better food, especially in the school lunch system. And eventually, you can see in the video, there was a new law that was passed. This law, what it did was to move funds from the food stamps to school lunch programs. What that meant for Aiden's family was that the food stamps that the mom was receiving was less, or sometimes even taken away, for him to be able to have better food at the school, by just a few cents.

Now eventually, she found a job. In the documentary, you can see how happy she was. Her body felt the joy of a goal accomplished. Finding a job meant no longer qualifying for food stamps, and to her surprise and her demise and her sadness, she was back to not earning enough to be able to feed her family. Malnourishment affected Aiden's physical and cognitive development. In this communal body in which we live, the bodies of many women, like Aiden's mom, Barbie, are trying with all their might to feed their children every day, and many of them cannot succeed. Just like Mary, Jesus' mother, could not afford the lamb for her purification ritual.

The political body to which we belong keeps crucifying people like them, people like Mary and Jesus and Barbie and Aiden. The gospels do not tell us much about Jesus' access to food growing up. Luke is happy to summarize the next 12 years of Jesus' life by saying, "The child grew and became strong. He was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was on him."

Now we might disagree on what the solution might be for the children of this country and of the whole world to not suffer from food insecurity. As Christians, I hope that we can only hope that Aiden, like Jesus, would grow in strength, wisdom, and God's grace. But if we have the power to change the world, what can we do so that every single body in this country may have food? May God give us the strength to do it so. May God give us the dreams that Anna and Simeon had, and allow us to see with our own eyes, whole salvation.